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ABSTRACT

Schools in two neighboring rural Kentucky counties ("West" and "East") were studied to determine the effect of differing school organization on school functioning and community-school relations. Data gathered from public sources, attendance at faculty, staff and school board meetings, interviews, and faculty questionnaires revealed similar growth and development patterns in the economy and schools of both counties, but historically greater prosperity and population in West County because of better transportation systems. A larger tax base enabled West County to establish and maintain an independent school system in the major town, although outlying county schools were consolidated. East County's schools were completely consolidated; no community schools remain there. Schools in both counties are governed by boards of education. Differences in school functioning appear to be more a factor of differences in size and facilities than in organization. However, school-community relations in both counties have been affected by organizational differences. West County's independent system maintains excellent relations with its community, but both West's and East's consolidated schools generally lack strong community ties except at the elementary level. Apparently, grade levels are significant in successful consolidation. Also, school organization is connected to economic conditions and school functioning to governmental mandates. (SB)

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PUBLIC SCHOOL ORGANIZATION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS

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PUBLIC SCHOOL ORGANIZATION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS*

Steve Kay, Nancy Hapgood, Rosanne Kruzich-Russell, Reba Rye, Rebekka Seigel, Joyce Winburn**

ABSTRACT

Two adjacent rural counties which are similar in many respects but differ substantially in the organization of their public school systems--principally in the extent of consolidation--were used as sites for comparative case studies. A pair of interrelated questions guided the research: What differences in the functioning of the schools are attributable to school organization? What differences in community life and school-community relations are attributable to differences in school organization? Intensive and extensive description provide an empirically grounded base for assessment of the focal questions.

School organization is seen to have minimal differential effects on the functioning of the schools among the three school systems. Greater differences are noted in the community life, most particularly in the area of school-community relations. Economic pressures, and state and federal involvement in local schools are cited as dominant factors in determining present school organization and functioning.

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of a one-year study which was designed to be highly descriptive in nature. We used the comparative case study method to gather a broad set of information about the interplay between public school organization and community development. A more detailed presentation of that information is available from this office.[1] Specific objectives for work in the two counties used as sites for this study were: 1) to describe the history and ecology of the schools as background for consideration of the present situation; 2) to describe the curricular and extracurricular functioning of the schools; 3) to describe present school governance and other linkages between the schools and the communities they serve; 4) to compare and contrast the two bodies of information generated to determine what differences could be attributed to differences in school system organization.

Key Terms

We use the term "school organization" primarily to refer to the extent of consolidation of schools and school systems within a particular locale. While consolidation of public schools often accompanies consolidation of school districts, they are two distinguishable activities which take place under

1.

the heading of public school organization. Consolidation of public schools involves physical change, such as placing the students of two or more buildings in one building, and usually involves closing one or more smaller school buildings. Consolidation of school districts, on the other hand, involves combining the administration of two or more school districts into one administrative unit.

We use the term "community development" to describe a range of activities that includes: patterns of settlement, shifts in population, economic development, and the maintenance, growth, or deterioration of communities.[2] Our focus is on the interaction and relationship between school organization and these factors of community development.

There is no generally agreed upon definition of "community" within the social sciences.[3] In this report we use the term to refer to groups of people in specific geographic locations served by one or more identifiable institutions.

Overview

The effects of school organization on community development in rural areas has re-emerged as a topic of concern among educational theorists and practitioners. Sher and Thompkins, for example, analyze a series of factors which traditionally have been used to support the argument for the value of consolidation. They conclude that consolidation has not been able to live up to the claims made on its behalf for well over half a century. In addition, they charge that consolidation has taken

its toll in rural areas.[4] Even more than in the cities, consolidation in rural areas would appear to have had an adverse effect, for the school often functions there as the center for the community. Tyack reports that prior to the great shift to consolidation "school and community were organically related in a tightly knit group which met face to face and knew each other's affairs."[5]

Some claim, then, that many problems of rural education have not been solved by consolidation and that some aspects of the problem of rural living, particularly the maintenance of traditional community life, may have been aggravated by it. The problem remains one of determining the best ways of providing an adequate education in rural areas while integrating schools and the communities they serve into one meaningful whole.

METHODS

Site Selection

We selected two rural counties for this project based on their proximity to one another and their similarities in such factors as size and population density, social, economic, and historical background, and reliance on the land for growth and development. One county has a completely consolidated school system while the second has an independent school system and a county system with multiple school sites. For the purposes

of this study, we will refer to the consolidated county as East County, the non-consolidated county as West County, and we will use pseudonyms for other local places.

Approach and Working Methods

We have used an ecological approach[6] to look at one major topic: the effects of the formal organization on school functioning, community functioning, and on the relationship between schools and the communities they serve. The body of this report thus relies on extensive description of the two counties, their history, and the present functioning of their school systems. Data gathered within the counties has been supplemented by related historical and statistical information gathered from the State Department of Education, State Archive, Legislative Research Commission, and other public sources. Relevant elements of state history--and less so national history--are referred to, to provide a larger context within which to understand events in the two counties.

Description of the Field Work

The project involved a principal investigator as coordinator and five researchers doing field work in three school systems and the communities they serve. Two of the school systems are in West County; one is in East County. The principal investigator and the two researchers working in East County had

been involved in research in that county the preceeding year. This office had no prior contact with West County.

We made initial formal contact by sending letters to each superintendant outlining the proposed work of the grant, soliciting cooperation, and promising personal contact in the near future. Individual staff members then made appointments with each of the superintendants. At subsequent meetings we provided copies of the grant proposal and further explanations of the project.

In all three systems the first step in data collection involved one researcher in each system reading and analyzing the records of its school board's monthly meetings. This work entailed lengthy and regular visits to the administrative offices of each of the systems over a period of three months. In this way the superintendants and members of their staffs became familiar with the field workers and many occasions arose for informal discussions about the history and present functioning of the school systems and about the work of the grant. All field workers report growing acceptance by, and rapport with, the administrative staffs over the period of this data collection. During and following this period, research activities in the three systems included individual contacts with principals, guidance counselors, and teachers to collect information on the present curricular and extracurricular functioning of the schools. Researchers were invited to school board meetings,

faculty meetings, and administrative staff meetings. Contacts with the communities included attendance at meetings of retired teachers' associations, meetings with members of each county historical society, attendance at school events open to the community, and visits to county libraries and newspapers.

Following the initial collection period, the full staff discussed and compared data and refined the set of categories used to collect information from the three systems. These refined categories were then used to check for consistency of information and to facilitate analysis of the data. Researchers returned to the field to consult written sources or to interview individuals in order to fill in gaps in the information collected. In proceeding in this inductive fashion, we allowed the data to lead us in relevant directions within the general scope of the goals of the research, rather than attempting to force the data to fit a preconceived format. Thus we became aware of important topics which we had not anticipated, some of which have been included in this project and some of which form the basis for further research.

The final formal element of the field work entailed administration of a questionnaire to all faculty members concerning curricular and extracurricular linkages between the schools and their respective communities. In the initial phase of feedback we published in each county newspaper decade

summaries of the respective school board minutes--set in the context of the general and legislative history of education in the state--and solicited further response from the residents.

In the final phase of this project the full staff prepared a technical bulletin containing the extensive details upon which the discussion and conclusions of this report are based.

DISCUSSION

Description of East and West Counties

Both counties selected as sites for this project lie in the outer edge of the most fertile farming region on Kentucky. The Kentucky River forms a North-South dividing line between them, with numerous tributaries feeding into the river from both counties. The natural resources in both counties established a pattern of growth which has continued to the present. The Kentucky River provides the rich bottom lands for farming, and towns and villages sprang up along its shores, creating centers for trade, commerce, and social activities. This was particularly true in East County, where most settlements were along the western or northern part of the county along the river and a major tributary. The steamboat reigned as the most available means of transporting goods and people until the late 1800's and significantly aided the communities in their

economic and social development. When the more versatile railroad displaced the steamboat, East County experienced economic stagnation from lack of rail lines, while West County prospered with two rail lines.

The various forms of transportation and accessibility to outside markets were and are determining factors in the evolution of economic growth in the two counties. Compared to West County, East County has been considerably more isolated. There are no major roads or interstate highways going through East County. By contrast, one interstate highway runs parallel to West County's western border and there is easy access to another which runs through a neighboring county. The result of West County's adequate transportation system in the present century has been the emergence of small businesses and a number of industries in the county, resulting in turn in more diverse employment opportunities, a larger tax base with which to provide needed services, and less out-migration of residents in comparison to East County.

The land in both counties has been a constant and stabilizing influence on their inhabitants. In both counties more than three-fourths of the land remains farmland, with the greatest percentage used for commercial production. The predominant crops are tobacco, corn, and hay. There are, nonetheless, subtle shades of difference in their rural cearacters. East County covers 351 square miles with a population of 7,600; West County covers 289 square miles with a population of 12,100. East County's smaller population, spread over a larger area, and its less extensive road system, combine to

isolate East Countians from one another and from surrounding areas.

As a result of the settlement and growth patterns in each county--as indicated by property values, income, degree of federal and state assistance, unemployment figures, and local revenues--West County has been and continues to be more prosperous than East County. Land is of higher value in West County; thus property taxes yield more revenue with which to provide essential servuces and facilities. With a sound financial base, a complete range of public services, and accessibility to outside markets, West County has been able to attract and keep small industries. This cycle of continued economic growth has remained fairly constant in West County despite a population which declined until 1970. An influx of new residents in the western part of the county, which reflects a nationwide shift in population from urban to rural areas, has reversed the downward trend in population in West County. Population projections for both East and West counties show steady increases through the year 2000.

Big Town continues to be the primary trade center and the largest town within West County. Big Town has been able to maintain a school system separate from that of the county, reflecting an extremely stable financial base and supportive community. East County's largest city is the county seat

at the geographic center of the county. It acts as the center for most economic and political activity , as the site for the consolidated elementary and high school, and as the center for most educational and school related functions for the entire county.

History of the School System

Despite the present differences in school organization in East and West counties, both counties experienced similar patterns of growth and development and for many years had roughly comparable systems. Development on both counties can be linked directly to state policies and legislation, which in turn reflected national trends in education. Throughout the nineteenth century the emphasis nationwide was on the creation of "common schools," with the intent being to provide education for all citizens. With state encouragement and backing, every little hamlet and settlement established a school of some sort for their children. By 1860 East County had sixty districts with a combined pupil census of 3,824, while West County had forty-two school districts with a combined pupil census of 2,759. Each district usually supported one school.

At the turn of the century emphasis shifted from creation of schools and universal enrollment to the establishment of standards for school performance and efficient operation. Consolidation of schools and school systems came to be seen as

a key to improvement on both counts. By means of a series of legislative actions--most notably the County Board Bill of 1908, the County Administration Law of 1920, the New School Code of 1934, and the Minimum Foundation Law of 1954--the state encouraged, facilitated, or mandated consolidation of schools and school districts. The United States Supreme Court ruling on desegregation in 1954 set in motion the consolidation of all black and white schools. State initiatives, coupled with shifts in commerce and population, determined the fate of each county's schools and school systems. East County's continual loss of population and wealth spelled doom to a succession of community schools. West County's lighter and more gradual population losses had less negative effect on its economy and enabled communities to maintain their schools for a longer period of time. Big Town in West County fared best of all, being in the center of trade and commanding the lion's share of its county's population and wealth, thereby assuring continuation of its independent school system.

After the turn of the century education for all children was a given. Campaigns had been successfully waged at the state level to encourage citizens to support a system of public education. In the process of building support among the citizenry, responsibility for a community's school slowly shifted from local control to state and

federal control as these latter sources provided increasing proportions of the funds needed to continue operation of the schools. Relinquishing responsibility for the schools was often synonymous with losing them. The state believed that community schools were too numerous and too costly to operate. What began as state encouragement ended in state mandates to close and to consolidate schools and school districts into larger, more centralized buildings and systems.

The state was extremely successful in this endeavor, particularly in East County, where the consolidation process is complete and no community schools survive. East County's school system consists of one elementary school building and one building housing junior high and high school. While the West County system has consolidated its high school grades into one building and has a middle school for all its sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, it does retain three elementary schools. Of the three, two are located within

distinct communities, though they serve other communities as well; the third is a consolidated school which serves children from many areas but is not located within a distinct community.

West Independent most closely approximates the community school concept since the elementary, junior high and high school grades are contained within the distinct community of Big Town and supported by its residents. Big Town has always had comparatively low enrollments but has never been seriously strapped financially. The economy is sound and property taxes have generated sufficient funds to maintain the school system at the state-prescribed level. It has, therefore, been able to resist state pressures to consolidate with West County's school system.

The present situation of the three systems is representative of conditions of school organization throughout the state. State emphasis has accordingly shifted to the establisment of regional multi-district educational service agencies, which offer economies through the sharing of resources among several school districts. Pressures for further consolidation have thus been eased.

Present Organization

In examining the present organization of the three school systems we find much greater similarity than difference. Where

there are differences, extent of consolidation as a causal factor is often overshadowed by size of the student population.

Each school system in the state is governed by a board of education. The three systems studied have five-member boards with each member elected from distinct voting districts or precincts. Board members serve four year terms with membership rotated to allow for staggered elections. Each superintendant serves his board as secretary, answers directly to the board for all school system activities, and occupies a position somewhat removed from the daily operations of the schools.

West Independent, the smallest system, has the fewest facilities and least complex administration. They are somewhat limited in junior high and high school curricula and depend on outside support for many extracurricular activities. East County typically occupies a middle position in all comparisons. Benefitting administratively by consolidation, it needs fewer principals or support staff than West County. The system is large enough, though, that the necessity for dual administrative responsibilities found in West Independent is minimized. Curricular offerings are on a par with the larger West County system. West County, with the most schools and the largest student population, has the most complex administration, offers the broadest program of studies, and is able to offer more sports to its students. With its separate middle school facility, is provides for those

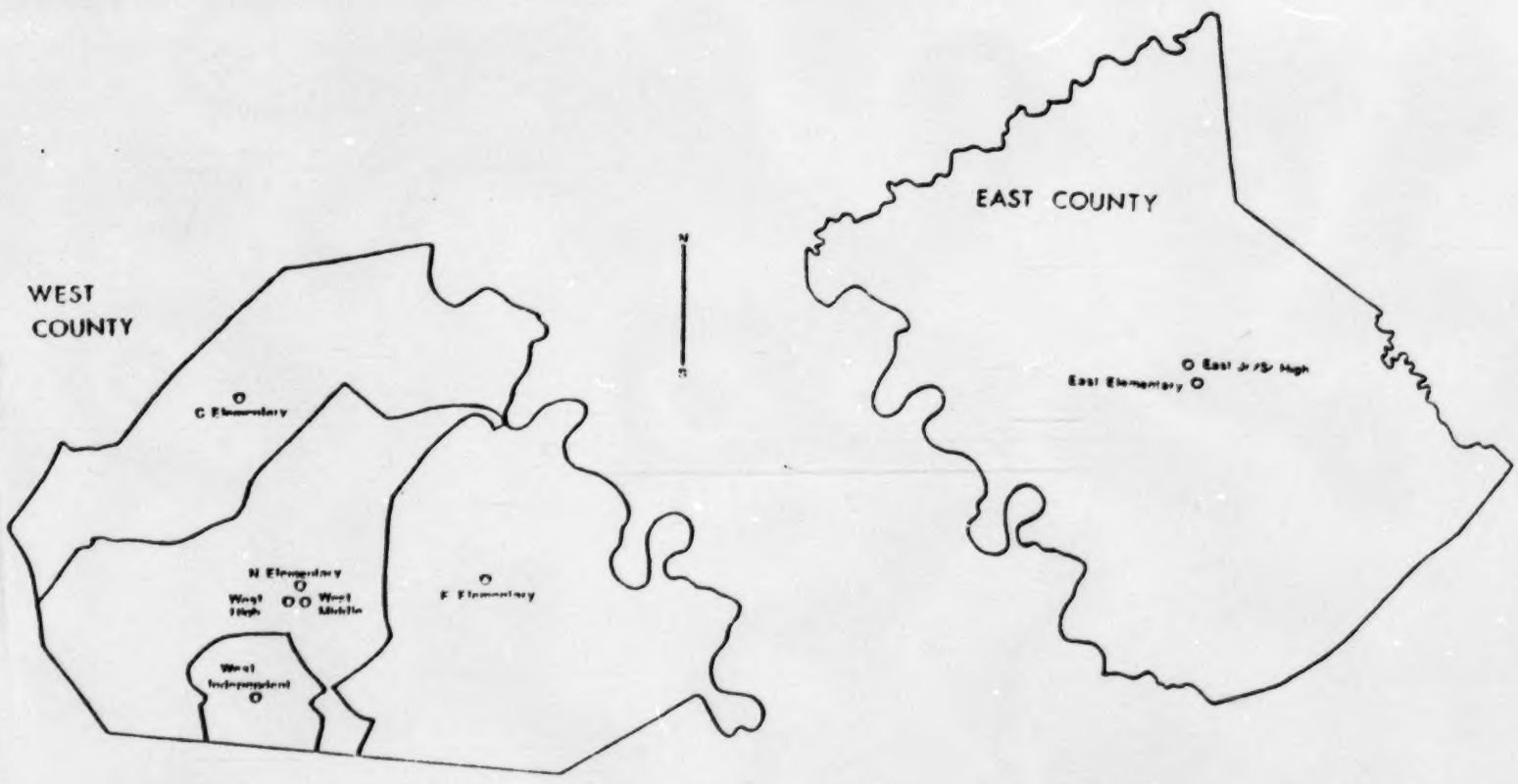
students added curricular and extracurricular attention.

At the elementary level, where there is much diversity in the degree of consolidation among the systems, there is little difference in curricular offerings. Programs of study in all three systems follow state requirements. The only major difference among them are in choice of textbooks and programming philosophy. Advantages of consolidation at the elementary level seem negligible.

School-Community Linkages

The term school-community linkages denotes any activity or exchange of informatiom or resources between a school and the community it serves. In this sense, the concept of "community" changes from one school system to another. In East County's completely consolidated system the community served by the high school, junior high school, and elementary school is the same, encompassing everyone within the county. West County, on the other hand, has a partially consolidated system which serves several communities. For the consolidated high school and middle school, the community served by the schools is the entire county (excluding Big Town), whereas each elementary school serves a distinct area within the county. West Independent schools have always served the distinct community of Big Town. (See map showing school locations and areas served by the schools on the following page.)

SCHOOL LOCATIONS AND AREAS SERVED BY THE SCHOOLS



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Similarities far outweigh differences in the nature and extent of linkages in the three systems. The primary link between school and community, the board of education, is created by the state and held under its jurisdiction. Board minutes of the three systems show that all three boards have come to stand more between state and federal agencies and the schools, and less between local citizens and the schools. The 1908 County Board Bill was a major step in establishing distance between school boards and local citizens. Still, in the period up until the 1940's, records of all three systems show regular input from concerned citizens about the effects of the major issue of that time--consolidation, and the transportation and construction it required. In addition, parents came regularly to the boards to comment on the conduct of bus drivers, teachers, principals, and coaches. Records from the two county boards then begin to show a decline in citizen input.

Beginning in the 1940's, state and federal mandates began accelerating. By the 1970's the list of new state and federally mandated or funded programs was long and diverse, and the boards spent a corresponding amount of time concerned with qualifying for funds or meeting compliance requirements. The board of West Independent District, though subject to the same mandates and pressures, seems to have maintained more of a balance between attention to concerns of local citizens and attention to

state and federal programs. This may be the result of the geographic proximity of citizens to the schools, and the social cohesion which accompanies that proximity.

In other areas, West High and East High show the greatest degree of similarity. Both are in consolidated systems serving a broad geographic area. The only noticeable effect of school organization on linkages at the middle school/junior high level appears to be the socialization factor at West Middle School, where three elementary schools feed into one facility which is separate from the high school.

The elementary schools in East and West County show the greatest difference. The smallness and physical proximity to their communities of two of the three West County elementary schools seems to encourage parent groups like the P.T.A. to be more involved and supportive of their schools. In East County the P.T.A. is strictly a money-making organization which met only three times in 1980-1981. The two community-related elementary schools in West County have P.T.A.'s which, in addition to their fund-raising activities, sponsor a broad range of activities to benefit parents, teachers, and students.

The West Independent System is an entity entirely to itself in this aspect of the comparison because it serves such a small and well defined area. The pride that parents and the community at large take in their school is apparent in the way in which people not directly connected with the school devise programs

for the benefit of the students. In this system, more individuals volunteer their time and skills to enhance the schools' programs.

CONCLUSION

In comparing the functioning of the schools in the three systems we have found minimal differences which are attributable to school organization. At the elementary level there are few differences among the three systems. At the level of the middle school or junior high school, the differences we have found can be attributed to the separate facilities enjoyed by the West Middle school. In West Independent and East County, these middle grades are curricularly distinct but otherwise tend to merge with the grades with which they are housed. At the high school level, differences in curricular and extracurricular activities seem more related to size of schools and differences in rural orientation than to school organization. The differences in size are not so great as to present serious comparative limitations in the smallest school, West Independent.

There are greater differences in the area of community development among the three systems and between the two counties which are attributable to school organization. The history of both counties reveals that small communities which lost population or remained small invariably lost their schools. Many of those communities have ceased to exist. Without additional historical

research we can only make the reasonable conjecture that the loss of the school hastened, or at least was a contributing factor in, the further decline of these small communities.

We have the sense, in addition, that existing communities which have lost their schools are at a relative disadvantage in maintaining community life and are socially and psychologically--as well as physically--remote from the schools to which they send their children. Most obviously, loss of the school eliminates one community gathering place. We also find initial evidence that there is less involvement in schools by parents who live furthest from the schools.

One conclusion in the area of school-community relations concerns West County. The independent system has little interaction with the county system. The cohesiveness of the community served by the independent system parallels and accentuates this lack of interaction. Except for integration of its black schools, Big Town has maintained its school system with no organizational change in the present century. In the sense of the introductory quotation from Tyack, the school and the community have remained "organically related." We find evidence of this relationship in the nature and frequency of school-community linkages and in the way in which the boundaries separating school and community are less strong and distinct than in the other systems we have considered.

The closest parallel we find to the interaction in the Independent District exists in the two elementary schools in West County which have continuously served geographically distinct

communities. One conclusion, then, relates to grade levels. The benefits--educational, social, economic--of school consolidation are less obvious in the lower grades, and the drawbacks more obvious. Young children, say kindergarten through sixth grade, need less diversity in curricular and extracurricular offerings--one of the salient points often offered in favor of consolidating high schools. Large elementary schools usually mean more units of each grade rather than additional offerings. One regret expressed about consolidation decisions in East County concerns consolidation of the elementary schools and the consequent loss of schools in the three communities most distant from the present school site.

Two factors which were not included in our original focus have come increasingly to our attention throughout the work on this project. First, there is the straightforward relationship between economic conditions and school organization, one that transcends educational and social considerations. The idea of consolidation, part of the centralizing tendency of the twentieth century, dominated thinking to such an extent that other ways of meeting perceived economic hardship were not seriously considered by professional educators. Relative economic prosperity of local communities is thus the constant factor in consolidation decisions. Economic conditions explain the difference in the lines of development which led in East County to a completely consolidated system and in West County to a less consolidated county system and an independent system.

The second factor is the way in which state and federal

mandates and programs--which include many of the factors of school organization and school-community relations-- have come to dominate the functioning of the schools. Our first suggestion for further research, therefore, is direct work in this area, with special attention to the most recent centralizing force, regionalization of administrative services.

Additional suggestions for further research related to areas which we have identified in this project as needing clarification in order to consider the focal questions more adequately. These include: investigation of the ways in which distance from school buildings effects student participation in extracurricular activities and parental involvement with the school; investigation of specific communities within school systems which have recently lost schools, for comparison with similar communities which have retained their schools; comparison within one system of communities which have local schools with those which do not; detailed comparison between one community which has retained its independent school system with a similar community which has not retained its independent system.

Finally, construction of these comparative case studies has reinforced our underlying operating principle that attention to local circumstances is neccesary for decisions about public policy. The three systems reveal that the question of school organization, which is itself complex, is integrally related to the social, economic, political, and cultural arrangements

within which the schools are embedded. Members of school boards, school administrators, and others concerned about school organization need to be aware of the range of effects which their decisions in this area have on the schools themselves, on the communities they serve, and on school-community relations.

FOOTNOTES

1. Technical Bulletin #1, KSUCRS Education/Psychology: Public School Organization and Community Development in Rural Areas. Three papers, all of which were presented in modified form at the Third Biennial Research Symposium of the Association of Research Directors, CRS, November, 1980, and which address sub-topics within the research effort, are also available from this office: Technical Bulletin #2, Paradigm for Evaluating School Consolidation Proposals; Technical Bulletin #3, The Importance of Grounding in Community Research; Technical Bulletin #4,The Invisible System: Negro Schools in a Rural Community.

2. For a fuller discussion of this definition of community development see Roland Warren, The Community in America, 2nd ed., (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1972), p.324ff.

3. An extended discussion of the difficulties attending the attempt at such a definition within sociology can be found in Colin Bell and Howard Newby, Community Studies (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), pp. 27-32.

4. Jonathan Sher and Rachel Tompkins, "Economy, Efficiency, and Equality: The Myths of Rural School and District Consolidation," in Jonathan P. Sher, ed., Education in Rural America: A Reassessment of the Conventional Wisdom (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977).

5. David B. Tyack, The One Best System (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 20-23. The competing claims of state and local school authorities are discussed in the context of a case study by Robert R. Alford in "School District Reorganization and Community Integration," Harvard Educational Review, V.49,#4,Fall,1960.

6. For a recent discussion of this approach to the study of education, see Elliot G. Mishler, "Meaning in Context: Is There Any Other Kind?" Harvard Educational Review, V.49,#1,February 1979. See also Seymour Sarason, The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1971), p.103ff;p.228ff.